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Artefact versus architecture: the use of space in Irish passage tombs

Artefacts versus architecture : l'utilisation de l'espace dans les tombes à couloir irlandaises

Robert Hensey

1 *Résumé long*

Pour des raisons évidentes, l'archéologie se fonde nécessairement sur les objets découverts dans les monuments afin d'interpréter le rôle et la fonction des sites mégalithiques. Dans le cas des tombes à couloir, parce que des restes humains sont invariablement associés aux monuments, la principale interprétation donnée ces trois derniers siècles au rôle de ces sites est celle de lieu de sépulture principalement. Ceci se reflète dans la terminologie utilisée pour les décrire. De nouvelles interprétations ont été proposées durant les quatre dernières décennies : les tombes à couloir comme marqueurs territoriaux, comme symboles de contrôle, ou comme lieu de vénération des ancêtres (concept au contour parfois mal défini). Toutefois, de manière cruciale, ces interprétations comme les autres ont été fondées essentiellement sur la présence de restes humains dans les chambres mégalithiques : les ossements sont des marqueurs de territoire, ou bien le droit d'accès aux ossements est le fondement d'un pouvoir politique, ou encore les ossements constituent le point central de cultes aux ancêtres, et ainsi de suite.

- 2 Et si en réalité les ossements humains n'étaient pas au centre des activités ayant eu lieu dans les tombes à couloir, mais seulement un élément dans une série d'activités dans ces sites ? Assurément, si les dépôts ont le potentiel d'éclairer le passé, ils ont de la même manière la capacité de nous détourner des réalités du passé. En effet, dans bien des cas, les vestiges matériels peuvent mal décrire ou mal représenter les activités du passé. Pourtant, ceci est rarement pris en compte dans nos interprétations des sites mégalithiques.
- 3 Comme presque toutes les tombes à couloir d'Europe, les monuments irlandais contiennent des ossements humains et des ensembles particuliers d'artefacts. En Irlande,

les restes humains furent habituellement crémés et accompagnés de broches en os ou bois de cervidé, de boules en pierre et argile cuite, de tessons de poterie, de pendentifs et de perles, et de morceaux de quartz blanc. Nombre de ces objets portent des traces de brûlure, indiquant qu'ils étaient sans doute disposés sur le bûcher funéraire. Comme l'origine de ces objets semble se trouver dans les bûchers funéraires, leur rôle au sein des activités rituelles à l'intérieur des tombes à couloir apparaît donc nécessairement limité. Ils nous informent avant tout sur les rites de crémation, qui ont pu avoir lieu sur des sites distants des monuments dans lesquels les ossements étaient ensuite ensevelis. De plus, il peut y avoir un écart chronologique entre le moment où une crémation a lieu et le moment où les ossements sont déposés dans la chambre mégalithique. Par conséquent, la valeur interprétative des objets directement associés avec les restes humains n'est utile pour évaluer les rites des tombes à couloir que dans la mesure où l'on considère le rite funéraire comme étant le rituel des tombes à couloir. Pour résumer, la plupart des interprétations à ce jour sur les tombes à couloir d'Irlande ont été élaborées à partir d'objets dont la relation avec les monuments n'est pas encore totalement comprise. Par conséquent, il serait judicieux d'utiliser une autre approche méthodologique pour évaluer les rôles de ces sites. En particulier, un examen plus attentif des formes et aspects architecturaux de ces monuments fournit de nouvelles possibilités pour appréhender la manière dont ces espaces ont été ou pu être utilisés. L'art mégalithique, les orientations astronomiques, les aspects morphologiques et d'autres éléments ont le potentiel de susciter de nouvelles pistes d'interprétation de ces sites.

- 4 Par exemple, on a réalisé ces dernières années qu'il n'existe pas qu'un seul art mégalithique, mais en fait plusieurs types de cet art qui, d'une certaine manière, semblent être consécutifs. Dans les tombes à couloir, l'art recouvre souvent des motifs plus anciens et il est parfois possible de détecter plusieurs niveaux de superposition. Cette stratigraphie artistique suggère que les gens ajoutaient des éléments et transformaient de manière active cet art à l'intérieur de monuments structurellement achevés. Nous pouvons donc dire avec quelque certitude que des personnes entraient dans les tombes à couloir non seulement pour y déposer des ossements humains, mais aussi pour y passer du temps au travers d'activités liées à la création, la modification et l'effacement d'art mégalithique. Les orientations astronomiques sont aussi pertinentes à ce sujet. Il s'agit de l'une des utilisations d'espace mégalithique les plus spectaculaires que nous connaissons. Bien que très débattus dans le passé, de nouvelles recherches ont montré que les considérations astronomiques dans les tombes à couloir d'Irlande étaient beaucoup plus importantes que ce que l'on pensait (environ 24 monuments concernés). Une partie de ces rituels ont pu impliquer l'observation des changements dans la tonalité et la qualité de la lumière du soleil à travers les saisons, ou bien de moments importants dans le cycle annuel du soleil. Dans cette possibilité, des personnes se seraient tenues à l'intérieur des monuments dans le but d'observer des événements astronomiques pour des périodes prolongées.
- 5 Un autre aspect de ces monuments sont les « dalles-portes » (*door-stones*) connues dans plusieurs sites ; il semble que plusieurs tombes à couloir avaient à l'origine une dalle servant à sceller l'entrée du couloir. Nous savons que ces dalles ont sûrement été retirées dans le passé avant que les monuments ne soient refermés, puisque dans les chambres ont été découverts des objets non seulement du Néolithique mais parfois aussi des périodes protohistoriques. Ces éléments indiquent que les monuments étaient régulièrement visités et refermés. Il est aussi important de noter la présence de vestiges de foyers à

l'intérieur de certaines tombes à couloir. Par exemple, les restes d'anciens feux ont été découverts dans la chambre des tombes de Bryn Celli Ddu et Barclodiad y Gawres au Pays de Galles, de Newgrange L en Irlande, et de Quanterness dans les îles Orcades (Ecosse). Georges Nash a étudié la présence de charbons résiduels à l'extérieur et à l'intérieur de chambres mégalithiques au Pays de Galles. Ces indices semblent indiquer des activités non-funéraires à l'intérieur des chambres.

- 6 Il n'est pas nouveau de suggérer que les tombes à couloir étaient conçues pour des rites fréquents plutôt que comme simples tombes. Les visites répétées des couloirs et chambres mégalithiques ont, toutefois, traditionnellement été considérées uniquement dans la perspective de rites liés à la pratique de nouveaux dépôts d'ossements par des spécialistes du rituel. Si l'on examine l'espace et l'utilisation de l'espace dans les tombes à couloir, il devient possible d'imaginer le rôle de ces monuments à travers des hypothèses jusque-là largement sous-théorisées. Si l'on prend en compte les cellules latérales disposées autour des chambres des tombes, les dalles-portes, les foyers, ainsi que le temps passé à l'intérieur des tombes qu'ont nécessité les périodes de création d'art mégalithique ou d'observation de phénomènes astronomiques, une nouvelle représentation des tombes apparaît dans laquelle l'intérieur des monuments peut être vu comme un espace d'activités, occupé par des personnes sur de longues périodes. En effet, il est possible que la manière dont ces espaces étaient utilisés aille bien au-delà du simple rôle passif de lieu de dépôt pour les restes des ancêtres. En accordant davantage d'importance à l'architecture des sites et aux usages potentiels de leur espace interne, il devient possible d'imaginer ces sites comme des lieux d'activités, où les gens passaient du temps isolés du reste de la communauté. L'hypothèse d'entraînements rituels intégrant un mode *imagiste* de religiosité mérite que l'on s'y intéresse davantage.

Introduction

- 7 For obvious reasons, archaeology has a reliance on, and hence predilection to emphasise the objects found within monuments when interpreting their role and function. In the case of Irish passage tombs, because human remains are invariably associated with the monuments, the principal interpretation of the role of these sites has been that they were concerned with burial. This view is perhaps most reflected in the terminology applied to passage tombs. They have been referred to in several ways over their known history, but 'passage grave' has been the most common archaeological term throughout the twentieth century. One of the earliest uses of the term in an Irish context was by Powell (Powell 1938) in the course of listing, grouping and defining the essential characteristics of the Irish megaliths. Variations on the burial theme are denoted by terms such as 'sepulchral chamber' (MacAdam 1855, Wakeman 1876), 'sepulchral cairns' (Conwell 1866), 'sepulchral mound' (Wakeman 1895), 'prehistoric grave' (Coffey 1911) and 'chambered grave' (Collins & Waterman 1952). The terms 'burial chamber' (Lynch 1966), 'burial cairn' (Walshe 1941), 'chambered tomb' (Henshall 1963, Piggott 1973, Richards 1992), and other combinations of these terms have similar implications.
- 8 In Ireland, the 'passage tomb' designation has superseded 'passage grave' as the most common term. The use of the suffix 'tomb' was made in recognition of the fact that these sites are distinguished by being over-ground structures, and that the word 'tomb' places an equal emphasis on the monument as on the burial (de Valera & Ó Nualláin 1972, xiii). Linguistic amendments perhaps tell us more about trends in the discipline of archaeology

than about the monuments. It would seem that underlying some terminological alterations have been attempts by archaeologists, especially in Britain and Ireland, to straddle the space between an older interpretative framework that was exclusively focused on the burial aspects of the monuments, and current interpretation which often defers towards cognitive concerns. Unfortunately, the linguistic palimpsest of burial terminology associated with passage tombs conveys an unequivocal message about the role of these sites. This language problem creates uncertainty between signified and signifier, whereby even though the scholar may not regard a monument as predominantly a burial structure, the language he or she is using carries this implication. As Thompson has noted, 'words do matter and have a discursive power of their own quite aside from their primary epistemological claims' (Thompson 2004: 342). Notwithstanding minor linguistic changes, it is clear that these monuments have been defined and labelled almost exclusively in terms of burial for the last 200 years. As this language has been so centred on the burial aspect of the monuments, it has served to limit the field of enquiry and tended to prejudice an open assessment of the monument's role. Given the absence of knowledge of the motivations and beliefs of Neolithic people, this is an unsatisfactory situation.

- 9 Over the last forty years, more nuanced interpretations of these sites have emerged: e.g., passage tombs as territorial markers (Renfrew 1976); as symbols of control (Shanks & Tilley 1982, Sheridan 1986, Ruggles 1999); and as places for the veneration of sometimes nebulously framed ancestors (Barrett 1988, 1994, Whittle 1996, 2003, Bradley 1998, Edmonds 1999, Cooney 2000). However, crucially, these and the other chief interpretations to the present day, whether implicitly or explicitly, have also been centred on the presence of human remains within megalithic chambers. The bones were markers of territory; or the right to access the bones was a source of political power; or the bones were the focal point of ancestral cults, and so on.
- 10 It is natural that we try to maximise the amount of information we can glean from the objects that survive the vicissitudes of time (Godsen & Marshall 1999, Holtorf 2002), but our tendency can be to over-analyse, even fetishize, those items. In this approach, the primary role of the monuments is assumed to be directly indicated by the artefacts and remains found within them. This may not always be the case. If finds have the potential to illuminate the past, they surely have an equal capacity to deflect us from past realities? In some instances, material evidence can be actively altered to create an impression not commensurate with reality. This is apparent with respect to the graves of members of the travelling community in the west of Ireland, for instance. This social group are considered to be the least wealthy strata of Irish society. Yet, if one was to compare traveller headstones (fig. 1) – which are sometimes constructed with imported Italian marble – with the more modest graves of the settled community surrounding it, one might incorrectly assume that the deceased member of the travelling community was an affluent elite. The social manipulation of funerary ritual is of course not a new insight or problem, and has been recognised in archaeology at least since the early 1980s (Hodder 1982, Parker Pearson 1982). Nevertheless, it is important to remind ourselves that manipulation of the material record still has relevance in today's more nuanced theoretical debate.

1. Tomb of a member of the Irish Traveller community, Leigue cemetery, Ballina, Co. Mayo

(photograph: author)



- 11 Additionally, many instances could be highlighted where the evidence of past rituals are necessarily absent. For example, there is a widespread recognition that evidence of feasting can be found in the archaeological record, but fasting, which has an equally important role in religious ritual, especially in rites of passage (Dietler 2011: 187), leaves no trace. Alternatively, the material result of an activity can be intentionally eliminated as an essential part of the event. For instance, Tibetan Buddhist monks pour the sand from coloured sand mandalas into a river or lake at the close of certain ceremonies (Brauen 2009). The making of these sometimes highly intricate mandalas is the focus of week-long rituals in which many hundreds of people can participate. Yet, all the evidence for the focal point of the ceremony – the mandala – is completely removed as an indispensable stage of the ritual. In these examples, it is not the intention of the religious practitioners to hide or disguise a ritual practice, but in both cases no material evidence of the rite would be found.
- 12 Suffice it to say, there are multiple ways in which the material record can fail to record, or misrepresent, past activities; yet, this perspective is rarely incorporated in our interpretations of the roles of megalithic sites. Might, for instance, the presence of human bone be over influencing our interpretation of the role of passage tombs? Could other ritual activities have taken precedence at some of these (morphologically variable) sites, for which little or perhaps no evidence remains?

Artefacts

- 13 The finds from Irish passage tombs are well-known and comprehensively described elsewhere (see Herity 1974, Eogan 1986). Like their European equivalents, all Irish passage tombs once contained human bone, together with a distinct set of artefacts. However, the assemblage, or how it was employed, tends to differ in different regions (Hensey forthcoming). The funerary rite can vary also: in the Irish passage tomb context, human

bone is more usually cremated, and accompanied by pins, balls of stone and baked clay, pottery sherds or occasionally complete vessels, pendants and beads, and pieces of white quartz (fig. 2).

2. Passage tomb finds. From pre-cairn cists I and II, Mound of the Hostages, Tara, Co. Meath

(photograph: J. Hession, after O'Sullivan 2005)



- 14 Pins are a common find from Irish passage tombs. Typically, they range from 10-15 cm, but larger examples are known. They are usually made from animal bone, but sometimes also from deer antler (cf. Bergh & Hensey 2013a, table 1). Passage tomb balls are made from chalk or baked clay, although polished stones (of varying geology) are most common. In size, they are best compared with children's marbles, most only 1-2 cm in diameter. Carrowkeel ware is a coarse pottery, rarely found complete. It is usually thick, and round-bottomed, often including tempers of crushed stone or shell. A type of decoration applied using a pointed implement and 'stab-and-drag' technique is common. Beads and pendants occur in a variety of materials and forms. Typically pendants are made from stone, often of attractive hue. However, examples made from bone (Mound of the Hostages), boar's tusk (Cairn E, Carrowkeel), and rock crystal (Carrowmore 3) are recorded. Beads are equally diverse. Eogan has noted 'elongated, ring or flat, round, oval, biconical, spool-shaped, barrel-shaped or oblate' as some of the forms (Eogan 1986: 143). As with pendants and stone balls many forms of material could be used; the colour and general attractiveness appear to be the primary motivating force in this decision. Materials receptive to being worked, softer stones such as soapstone and steatite, were popular. Together with these typical finds, there have also been discoveries of several finely worked objects, such as the maceheads and the conical carved stone from Knowth in the Boyne Valley passage tomb complex, and also stone basins found in several chambers.
- 15 Excavation reports frequently mention indications of burning on the finds from passage tombs. Indeed at the Mound of the Hostages passage tomb on the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath, the high degree of burning apparent on the stone balls was such that it actually hindered geological identification (Mandal 2005: 303). Equally, passage tomb pins or other objects

are often found in a fragmented state as a result of heat damage. The inference is that the main artefacts from passage tombs have been exposed to extreme heat, presumably in the course of cremation rituals. If so, it is likely that they were collected from the ashes with the cremated human bone and then placed within the passage tomb, rather than being deposited in separate ritual event. Consequently, the interpretive value of finds directly associated with the human remains is useful with regard to assessing passage tomb ritual only to the degree that we consider burial ritual to be *the* passage tomb ritual. If the deposition of human bone was only of secondary importance in some monuments, especially the larger more sophisticated sites, then these finds might best be considered incidental depositions.

Human remains

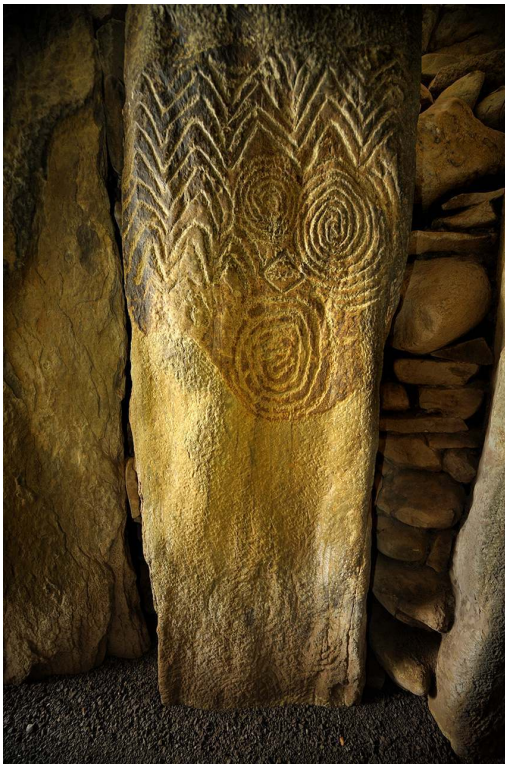
- 16 Contextual difficulties are equally relevant with respect to deposits of human bone. In some instances, the remains can be contextually or chronologically separated from the primary usage of the monument. It is clear that much of the bone from Irish passage tombs considerably post-dates the construction of the monuments (e.g., O'Sullivan 2005, Bergh & Hensey 2013a). Equally, there are other human remains that were associated with pre-monumental activity. We can note, for example, cases where human bone was found underneath a monument, or where it was placed in-between orthostats during the construction phase (Bergh 1995: 150, O'Sullivan 2005). Examples include Site L at Newgrange (O'Kelly *et al.* 1978), and Croaghaun (Bergh, forthcoming) and Carrowmore 7 (Burenhult 1980: 31) in north-west Ireland. These methods of depositing human remains (i.e., 'foundation deposits' and 'sealed orthostatic depositions') appear to be at odds with the monument's core design features.
- 17 The positioning of human remains in relation to the chamber may also be of interest. At developed passage tombs with corbelled roofs, the point in the floor beneath this dome is the fulcrum of the whole site and consequently one of the most ritually potent locations within the structure. Intuitively and architecturally, it would seem to be the optimum place to position a receptacle for taking the remains of the dead, if that was the primary function of the monument. However, human bone is rarely found in this area. On the contrary, it is found inside chambers, in the passage, under the passage, under flooring slabs, tucked into crevices, placed on top of orthostats, under sillstones, and at various places outside of the chamber; in fact, anywhere except the central part of the chamber. This situation is in itself an indication that the placement of human remains was not the primary or only role of these sites. It could be argued that many passage tombs, were ill-equipped structures for receiving deposits of human bone. It is almost as if morphologically unsuitable monuments have been made to accept depositions they were not designed to receive. It seems unlikely that these sites were constructed for such bone deposits.
- 18 Additionally, as M. J. O'Kelly, the excavator of Newgrange, once observed, the relatively small number of individuals represented by the human remains found in some megalith monuments indicates that, 'the structures themselves fulfilled the main requirement and that the burials were of a token nature' (O'Kelly 1989: 124). Hence, we must consider that while at many passage tombs the deposition of human remains may have been a primary motivation for their construction, at others it may have only had a small or even secondary role.

Passage tomb space: features and use

- 19 If O'Kelly was correct in this proposition that the structure fulfilled the site's main requirements, then a closer examination of the form, design and decoration of these monuments could indicate alternative ways these spaces were or could potentially have been used. For instance, in recent years, there has been a growing awareness that there is not just one passage tomb art, in fact there are several types, which to some extent seem to be consecutive (e.g. O'Kelly 1978, O'Sullivan 1986, 1989, 1997, Shee Twohig 2000, Robin 2009, Hensey 2012). In the Brú na Bóinne complex, Co. Meath an early stage of art is found hidden on the backs of construction stones. Additionally, types of art that must have been completed when the monuments structural stones were *in situ* are present. Often carvings do not continue down the stone beneath ground level, indicating that the orthostat was already in position when the carving was executed. Moreover, passage tomb art frequently overlays previous designs. Occasionally, the ghost signature of a former style of art can remain (fig. 3). At orthostat L19 in the passage at Newgrange the upper and lower portions of the stone have been picked away, but the previous design is still barely visible, in particular the series of spirals at the base of the stone.

3. Partially erased earlier art at base of orthostat L19, Newgrange, Co. Meath

(photograph: Ken Williams)



- 20 Perhaps the best evidence of the post-construction creation of art is the various forms of pick-dressing in the Boyne Valley (Eogan & Aboud 1990, Eogan 1997, O'Sullivan 1997). For instance, orthostat 45 in the western tomb at Knowth, has been shown to have five layers of picked superimposition (Eogan 1999, fig. 3). This level of artistic 'stratigraphy' suggests that people were actively adding to and altering the art within a structurally complete

monument. It should be noted that the creation of art may have been a quite labour intensive and time-consuming activity. Hence, we can say with some certainty that people were in passage tombs not only in connection with the deposition of human bones, but also engaged in activities relating to the creation, alteration, and elimination of passage tomb art.

- 21 Astronomical orientation is also germane to this discussion. Though much disputed in the past (Ruggles 1999: 1–11), recent comprehensive investigations have demonstrated that astronomical alignments were not uncommon in Irish passage tombs. Of 138 monuments with an extant passage, 24, or 17%, were astronomically aligned, invariably to solstitial sunrise or sunset (Prendergast 2011). Considerable planning and ingenuity would have been required to create these astronomically oriented structures. This begs the question whether after this effort people would have then sealed the monuments and not revisited them to observe the occasions they had put so much time into constructing? A more plausible scenario, is that people created these alignments in order for them to be witnessed. Elsewhere I have proposed that one of the main reasons for astronomical orientation was for the direct observation of the sun's light at close quarters (Hensey 2008) (fig. 4). At Newgrange, the winter solstice astronomical event would have taken place over a two-week period in the Neolithic. However, a one-day excursion to see the sun entering the site, then as now, stood a strong chance of being frustrated by unsuitable weather conditions. Therefore, even at a relatively precisely-oriented passage tomb such as Newgrange, a considerable period of days or weeks could have been spent inside the monument in order to witness the intended astronomical orientation. At other less precisely oriented sites, these rituals may have taken place over more extended periods. Hence, not only is there evidence that people spent time within some passage tombs with regard to the creation of art, but they may also have been inside for the purpose of viewing astronomical events over extended periods.

4. Observing winter solstice beam of sunlight at Newgrange, Co. Meath

(photograph: Ken Williams)



- 22 If individuals did spend extended periods within some passage tombs, what part of the monument could they have occupied? The most suitable location would appear to be at the end of the chamber in undifferentiated monuments, or in the side recesses of the more typical complex chambers. In fact, most passage tomb recesses are ideally sized for single-person-occupancy (fig. 5). A notable feature of the construction of Irish passage tombs is that these recesses remain relatively uniform in size even though the monuments themselves can greatly vary in scale. At monuments with undifferentiated chambers only one area which could be occupied (at the end of the passage), providing room for only one or two people. However, chambers with multiple recesses would have allowed three or more people to occupy the structure, while still leaving the central area free. Indeed, this may have been one of the advantages of the multiple-recess design. If people sat or squatted in these side recesses, the central part of the chamber would then have been open for movement or ritual performances, ceremonial acts, ritual fires, or in some monuments for the passage of sunlight (Watson 2001).

5. Person inside a typical passag tomb side recess. Ibister, Orkney Islands

(photograph: author)



- 23 Another interesting aspect of these monuments are the 'door-stones' known from several sites; it seems that many passage tombs once had a stone that served to seal the entrance to the passage. This element of the construction would have been one of the least likely pieces of evidence to survive in the archaeological record, as these blocking or sealing stones stood directly in the way of antiquarians and others wishing to force their way into the monuments. We know that such stones must have been removed in the past, and then the monuments resealed, as we occasionally find evidence for later prehistoric artefacts alongside the Neolithic material within the chambers (e.g., at the Carrowkeel complex, see Hensey *et al.* 2014). This appears to indicate repeat entry and closure of the monuments. Evidence of fire inside some passage tombs may also be significant.

Remnants of ancient fires have been found in the chamber at Bryn Celli Ddu and Barclodiad y Gawres in Wales (Nash 2008), at Newgrange Site L (O'Kelly *et al.* 1978: 261) and at Quanterness in the Orkney Islands (Renfrew 1979). At Quanterness, the central area of the chamber seemed to be where fires were located; fires were created using heather together with birch and willow (*ibid.*: 158 and Appendix A). In Barclodiad y Gawres, a hearth was found within the chamber measuring c. 1 m in diameter and thick enough to indicate repeat use (Nash 2008: 154). Nash has detailed the incidents of charcoal found outside and within the chambers of the Welsh monuments and argues that this evidence indicates that fire had an important role in passage tomb ritual. He has proposed that the use of fire may have been connected with the viewing of megalithic art inside the chambers, the provision of heat, and perhaps cooking of ritual meals (*ibid.*: 154–6). Again, this evidence seems to point to non-mortuary activity.

- 24 Finally, it should be noted that there are also some atypical finds from passage tombs, such as the maceheads and the conical carved stone from the main site at Knowth, in the Boyne Valley complex, and also stone basins found in several sites. Some of these artefacts do not appear to have had an association with the cremation pyre, or at least do not display evidence of burning. These objects may reflect wider ceremony and rituals unrelated to the deposition of human remains. Again, as with the creation of art and the viewing of astronomical events, these less typical artefacts may be an indication of people spending time engaged in activities inside passage tomb chambers.

Discussion

- 25 At the outset of this paper, it was observed that archaeological materials can be deceptive; they can lead us to false conclusions, and that many ritual acts leave little or no archaeological evidence. It may be that human remains have distracted us from other potential uses of these sites, perhaps rituals whose signature are to be found primarily in architecture rather than artefacts.
- 26 An additional difficulty is the limited number of reliable dates from Irish passage tombs (see Bayliss & O'Sullivan 2013 for discussion). With the exception of Mound of the Hostages (O'Sullivan 2005, Bayliss & O'Sullivan) and recent work in the Boyne Valley complex (Schulting *et al.* forthcoming), there are very few dependable dates on Irish passage tombs. In particular, there is a lack of chronological information from sites outside of eastern Ireland. Projects at Carrowmore (Bergh & Hensey 2013a & b) and Carrowkeel in north-west Ireland (Hensey *et al.* 2014) have improved the situation somewhat, but much work – including the retrieval of stratigraphical secure samples through fresh excavations – is still required to give us better resolution on the activities which took place at these monuments. We can at least say that at some sites, most notably at Carrowmore (Bergh & Hensey 2013a), that the monuments were in use for several hundred years. However, the Carrowmore sites are small and rudimentary, and may be part of an early wave of passage tomb construction on this island, founded on practices that are less representative of later passage tomb use (see Hensey forthcoming, Chapter 1 with references). We have less knowledge of how the larger passage tombs (i.e., those suitable for human entry) were used; or, crucially, the chronological order of activities within them. Certainly, those monuments had calculated orchestration of space and design, and human movement within those spaces (Thomas 1992, 1993). As already outlined, time was also spent inside them with regards to the creation of art and

witnessing of astronomical phenomena. That art appears to be phased, in some cases may suggest activities throughout the period the monuments were open.

- 27 Clearly, more work is required to untangle the order of events at passage tombs. We are not at a total loss, however; new insights can still emerge on the basis of current evidence. Though it is not a new idea to suggest that passage tombs were designed for repeat ritual rather than as simple tombs, repeat entry and exit from passage tombs has traditionally been considered only in relation to rituals concerned with the deposition of human remains.
- 28 If one examines space and the use of space in passage tombs, it becomes possible to imagine the role of these monuments in ways that have been under-theorised. When recesses, door-stones, hearths, and possible ritual equipment are considered, together with the periods of time inside passage tombs required to create megalithic art, or to observe astronomical phenomena, a picture is created in which the interior of the monuments can be seen as relatively active places, where people may have been present for extended periods. Indeed, it is possible that how these places were used went far beyond a role as passive repositories of human remains. Though passage tombs are not usually considered as connected with rites in which people were stationed in the monuments for extended periods, it is a possibility that cannot be excluded.
- 29 Harvey Whitehouse (Whitehouse 2004a, 2004b), an anthropologist with expertise in the cognitive science of religion, has devised a useful paradigm, which might be successfully applied to some Irish passage tombs. He has proposed that religions have a tendency to deviate towards two core modes of religiosity, or more correctly to two attractor positions. The first category he names *doctrinal*. This form of religiosity involves frequent repetition of religious teaching, and tends towards low level emotionality. Rituals place emphases on steady and continual reinforcement of ideas or beliefs over long periods. Most religions 'of the book' would fall into this category. The second mode of religious transmission, which Whitehouse (Whitehouse 2000) considers the more archaic form, he refers to as *imagistic* religiosity. It revolves around high arousal experiences that expose the person to spontaneous exegetical reflection. Whitehouse describes imagistic rites as '...very intense emotionally; they may be rarely performed and highly stimulating (e.g., involving altered states of consciousness or terrible ordeals and tortures)' (Whitehouse 2004a: 63). These emotionally powerful events, which are often difficult or traumatic, can take years or even a life-time to internally process.
- 30 With imagistic religion, teachings do not have to be slowly learned and continually reinforced as with doctrinal modes of religiosity; rather the initial emotional event is relatively quick, and then followed by a long period of slow release as the experience is assimilated. He notes that imagistic experiences '...tend to trigger a lasting sense of revelation and to produce powerful bonds between small groups of ritual participants' (Whitehouse 2004a: 63). The tendency for Irish passage tombs to be clustered in complexes, and the preference for multiple-recessed monuments might be fitting in a context where bonding of a small group was one objective of the rituals. For a initiand to be brought to an isolated landscape and then required to pass into a structure perhaps associated with powerful ancestral spirits would, one imagines, be an incredibly intense proposition. Dwelling in seclusion within the darkened passage tomb chambers over an extended period would have allowed these individuals to process intense experiences, or to absorb instructions imparted by a senior religious practitioner. Revelatory experience in the course of this religious training might go some way to explaining the multiplicity

of design features which appear associated with passage tombs, most notably the tremendous variability of passage tomb art.

- 31 To what extent the interpretation advanced here is applicable in other passage tombs regions is an open question. Different passage tomb regions may have engaged with the megalithic phenomenon in different ways, depending on the social and religious requirements in those areas. Additionally, one has to be cognisant that there can be a chronological disjuncture with respect to passage tomb construction in different regions. It would appear, for instance, that the passage tomb construction in Brittany was at an end (c. 3900 BC) before it had begun in Ireland (see Scarre 2011: 76 & 145, Bayliss & O'Sullivan 2013). Nevertheless, it is clear that developments in the passage tomb tradition of Ireland influenced other areas, in particular Wales (Lynch 2000: 73, Sheridan 2000, Burrows 2010) and northern Britain, including the Orkney Islands (Bradley & Chapman 1984, Eogan 1982, 1992, Sheridan 1986, Davidson & Henshall 1989, Cooney 2000). It may be that this influence went beyond design, especially passage tomb art, and also included forms of ritual practice.
- 32 In summary, it is clear that archaeology's dependence on material remains can work against it at an interpretative level. Placing more weight on the architecture of the site and the potential use of the internal space, it becomes possible to imagine some passage tombs as relatively active places, where people spent time in isolation from the wider community. And it may be that through further examination the form of monuments, and consideration of the potential uses of space within them, rather than being overly swayed by human remains, that we can begin to consider passage tombs from new perspectives.
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RÉSUMÉS

Cet article aborde la question de l'interprétation et de la culture matérielle dans la tradition des tombes à couloir d'Irlande. Lorsque nous interprétons le rôle de ces monuments, faut-il nous baser prioritairement sur les ossements humains et les mobiliers associés, ou plutôt sur l'espace construit ? Si les dépôts funéraires ont la capacité de nous éclairer sur le passé, on avance ici qu'ils ont également la capacité de nous détourner des réalités du passé – un point qui n'est pas suffisamment pris en considération par les archéologues. Bien que le dépôt de restes humains fut certainement un aspect central pour la construction des tombes à couloir, il est également possible que cette pratique n'ait eu qu'un rôle partiel ou secondaire dans certains monuments. En prenant l'espace comme référence principale pour l'interprétation de ces sites, il devient alors possible d'envisager d'autres rôles que les tombes à couloir ont pu remplir.

This paper examines interpretation and material culture in the Irish passage tomb tradition. Specifically, it asks whether the finds of human bone and associated artefacts or the built space should take precedence when interpreting the role of these monuments. It is proposed that just as finds have the potential to illuminate the past, they have an equal capacity to deflect us from past realities – a point that is sometimes insufficiently considered by archaeologists. Though the deposition of human remains may have been central to the construction of passage tombs, it is equally possible it had a partial or secondary role at some monuments. If we consider space as the primary arbiter in the interpretation of these sites, then it becomes possible to envisage alternative roles that passage tombs may have fulfilled.

INDEX

Mots-clés : Irlande, Néolithique, tombes à couloir, restes humains, espace

Keywords : Ireland, Passage tombs, Ritual, Human Remains, Space

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